

## Its Only Rock and Roll: John Byrne's Scotland

Paul Elliott, University of Worcester

...I was brought up in Ferguslie Park housing scheme and found myself at the age of fourteen or so *rejoicing* in that fact and not really understanding why...Only later did I realise that I had been handed the greatest gift a budding painter/playwright could ever have...an enormous 'treasure trove' of language, oddballs, crooks, twisters, comics *et al.*...into which I could dip a hand and pull out a mittful of *gold dust*.

(Byrne 2014: 23)

John Patrick Byrne was born six days into 1940 and grew up in the Ferguslie Park area of Glasgow. His father earned a living through a series of laboring and manual jobs and his mother was an usherette at the Moss Park Picture House. Byrne took to painting and drawing from an early age and recounts his mother stating that he began drawing in the pram as she wheeled him around the housing estate where they lived. As evidenced by the quote above, Byrne constantly drew on the people he met and saw in his early childhood for his art, and much of his later work can be seen to reflect this child-like vision of the world.

When he was in his late childhood, Byrne's mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and taken to the Riccartonbar Mental Hospital in Paisley. This had an enormous impact on the young artist's development and his creative output would be peppered with images of feminine abandonment and women with fragile mental states. Stints at the Glasgow and Edinburgh Schools of Art allowed Byrne to develop as an artist; however after staging his first play *The Slab Boys* in 1978, he also wrote extensively for the theatre and, throughout the 1980s at least, for television.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult then to separate Byrne's art from his writing, they share a visual DNA, and they spring from the same store of psychological pain and comic memory.

In an autobiographical watercolour painted in 2002, the artist depicts himself as a young boy staring, in an empty cinema, at an illuminated screen. These two elements - a fascination for the visual and the acknowledgment of his status as an outsider - informed much of his television work during the 1980s. Despite writing *Tutti Frutti* (BBC 1987), one of the most critically acclaimed TV dramas of the decade and a series of plays that enjoyed a revival in 2003, John Byrne's work has not been seen on television since the early 1990s when his

series *Your Cheatin' Heart* (BBC 1990) failed to garner the lavish praise of his previous work. Some of this extended hiatus can be put down to shifts in the commissioning of drama by the BBC. Byrne was part of the last wave of an author-centered commissioning practice that began in the mid-1970s with series like *The Wednesday Play* (BBC 1964 – 1970) and *Play for Today* (BBC 1970 – 1984) and continued throughout the 1980s supporting the work of many of the great British scriptwriters and playwrights from Dennis Potter to Alan Bleasdale. From the mid-1990s British serials began to be team-written in a model that more closely mirrored American television. Even with this change in philosophy however Byrne's absence from the TV schedule seems notable, with even re-runs and video and DVD re-issues of his work being scarce.<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons for this lack of consistent support for his television work could be the complexity and the ambiguity of Byrne's vision, especially of Scotland. Scotland is both continually present and curiously absent from his TV scripts. Serials like *Tutti Frutti* and plays like *The Slab Boys* (BBC 1979) portray Scotland and Scottish identity not through the usual channels of landscape, environment, and history but through language, humour, and character. Byrne's characters, like his portraits, are often semi-comic, not caricatures as such, but cartoons in the classical sense of the term. In art history, the cartoon was a preparatory drawing or sketch that would be used as a basis for a larger, more formal work. Often, as in Da Vinci's 'The Burlington House Cartoon', figures would be sketched out against a blank background giving them an intensity that rarely appeared in the finished painting. Byrne's painted portraits often depict his subjects seated or standing against a plain wall, a featureless sky, or merely a block of colour. What interests Byrne is the human, the connection between the subject, the artist, and the viewer. His televisual characters are 'drawn' in similar fashion against the drabness of Scottish quotidian life; their absurdity is suggested through costume and personal obsession but their environments are anonymous and functional. They look and often act like cartoon characters transported into a real world. They are comic figures but their milieu is decidedly realist, an aesthetic that Hewison, recalling novels and plays by South American writers of the 1970s and 1980s, calls 'semi-magical realism' (Hewison 2011: 68).

This article looks at how Scotland and Scottish identity are evoked in three of John Byrne's television works: *The Slab Boys*, *Tutti Frutti*, and *Your Cheatin' Heart*. The first of these works was a one hour play, the last two, six part serials. However, each represents an attempt by Byrne to capture a Scottish spirit through what Duncan Petrie calls a 'juxtaposition of muted naturalism punctuated by moments of visual excess' (Petrie 2004: 57). I want to suggest here that Byrne, unlike many traditional exported images of Scotland, deliberately

elides the physical geography and landscape of the country in favor of explorations of character and language. Byrne's Scotland is at once mythic and quotidian, it is tragic and ridiculous, it is patriotic and self-critical and it is sentimental and realist. His television works use music, costume and character to evoke a world that is credible and yet fantastical. It is a Scotland that is instantly recognizable and yet, as a geographical place, strangely absent.

### **Language and Identity – *The Slab Boys***

In the influential opening chapter of *Contemporary Scottish Fictions*, Duncan Petrie highlights the cultural binary between tartanry, the 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticisation of Scottish rural culture, and Clydesideism, the opposite but equally romantic image of working-class urban and mainly masculine Scottishness, as Petrie explains:

The discourse of 'Clydesideism' embodies a complex relationship between individual and collective experience in which the idea of a shared working-class consciousness, rooted in political struggle and a culture defined by hard physical work and boisterous leisure activities, sits alongside a concern with the individual subject who is representative yet somehow still unique and distinctive.

(Petrie 2004: 25)

Both of these modes of representation rely on depictions of space and place. Scottish identity is explored through recourse to either the rural world (tartanry) or the urban (Clydesideism). Although not unique to depictions of Scotland, it is possible to discern a correlation between character and place in its exported national images. National identity is forged from the dialogue that exists between the environment and the individual – the rugged highlander, the hard man of the Clydeside docks, the Calvinist Edinburgh school teacher, and so on.

In Byrne's television work however, space is passed over in favor of character. Often, his television plays are set in anonymous interior spaces that are windowless, offering no glimpse onto the outside world. Scottishness has to be inferred through character, aspiration

and most of all through the cadences and motifs of language. Byrne was to develop this strategy throughout his career and we see it in embryonic form in his play *The Slab Boys*.<sup>3</sup>

*The Slab Boys* was first performed on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1978 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. Drawn from his own experience as a slab boy (a mixer of paint) in the 1950s, Byrne's play encapsulates many of the tropes and themes that would come to characterize his later television work: unrequited (or at least only partially requited) love, dark humour and tragedy connected to a fragile feminine presence all appear in most of his television work and his stage plays. Reacting to the dark nature of its themes, *The New York Times* described *The Slab Boys*' humour and dialogue as 'salty and vibrant' (Rich 1983) but bemoaned the intrusion of more serious subjects like mental illness and existential malaise into its comedy.

*The Slab Boys* details a day in the life of Spanky Farrell, Phil McCann and Hector McKenzie, all of whom work as paint mixers for A.F. Stobo and Co. a firm of carpet manufacturers in Paisley. Set in 1957, the set for the stage play was deliberately cramped and dark to reflect the low status of the main characters. Each dreams of a way out of the slab room, and art, rock and roll and the cinema provide necessary distractions from the many rejections (romantic and career-wise) of which the boys are victims. The social status of the three main characters provides the background to a coming of age narrative that mirrors Byrne's own journey from housing estate to school of art. The real time narrative traces the lines of each character's destiny as, by the end of the drama, Phil is sacked, Spanky continues to work in the slab room and Hector gets a coveted promotion to the design office. However, it is the play's verbal dexterity and resilience that gives it its bite and that also provides its heart and hope. The verbal rhythms of the main characters were drawn from Byrne's upbringing and help situate the play within the environs of Glasgow despite the stage set not opening out onto the city at all. The initial exchange between Spanky and Hector exemplifies the fast-paced patter of the dialogue and the way that vernacular is used to suggest both place and class:

Spanky: Hey, where'd you get the wireless, Heck? Never seen you with that this morning...

Hector: Had it planked down the bog...didn't want 'you-know-who' to see it.

Spanky: Does it work? Give's a shot... (Grabs radio). Where's Luxembourg?

Hector: Watch it, Spanky...you'll break it!...

[Spanky breaks the radio's aerial]

Hector: You swine, look what you've done!

Spanky: Ach! That's easy fixed...

Hector: Give us it. (Twiddles knobs. Gets Terry Dene singing 'A White Sport Coat').

Spanky: Good God, could you not've brung in a more modern wireless? That's donkey's out of date.

Hector: I like it.

Spanky: That's 'cos you're a tube, Hector.

(Byrne 2003: 13)

Byrne uses language in *The Slab Boys* for comic effect, rejoicing in the earthiness of working-class Glaswegian. In an early scene, Phil explains why he was late to work by complaining of 'a touch of the drawhaw' (Byrne 2003: 14); when asked to elaborate, he explains that he had 'the skitters...it was very bad'.

Byrne adapted his play for the BBC's *Play for Today* series and it aired on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1979. It starred Gerard Kelly as Spanky, Billy McColl as Phil, and Joseph McKenna as Hector. Unlike many in the series, Byrne's adaptation retained its theatrical roots and the feeling of Bob Hird's direction is one of a filmed stage performance rather than televisual realism. The television camera acts as an audience member effectively seated in the theatre. The adherence to theatrical staging was not usual for *Play for Today* that was more likely to present drama on location or as a realist televisual piece. *The Slab Boys'* staging adds to the play's non-naturalist (or perhaps even semi-magical) feel. A fact that situates Byrne's work within a history of post-1960s TV writing.<sup>4</sup>

As John Caughie outlines, British television drama in the 1970s and 80s can be seen to have been developing towards a popular modernism as dramatists like Dennis Potter and John McGrath experimented with form and style (Caughie 2000: 39-64). In a seminal article written in 1964, Troy Kennedy-Martin began a dialogue between naturalism and non-

naturalism that was to alter television drama for the next two decades (Kennedy-Martin 1964). Kennedy-Martin (and others that followed) advocated a move away from the studio-based naturalism of television drama pre-1960 and suggested the adaptation of an aesthetic that would privileged experimentation. *The Slab Boys*, although heralding from this same-author-based philosophy does not neatly fit into either camp – it is neither naturalist, nor modernist. Its characterizations are based in reality, but they are sometimes rendered so absurd and comic that they expose the working of the text. They are caricatures played out against a real, and largely blank, world. Byrne's work comes closer to the plurality between realism and modernist that John Caughie advocates should be the characteristic of all Scottish television drama. Writing in 1982, Caughie stated that:

At the very least, television much more than cinema or literature, demands a plural strategy, Somewhat to my surprise, while looking at the traditions of modernism to unsettle established ways of looking and unfix received identities, I would also want to pose the possibilities of naturalism. (1982: 118)

As McMillan suggests, Byrne's play traces the development of a specific post-war Scottish culture without ever setting foot outside of the slab room (2015). Scottish identity is contained within the spoken rhythms of the characters and their shared dreams and aspirations. Primarily a painter, Byrne has always taken great care over the sets of his plays, a fact that contributed to the staginess of *The Slab Boys*' television production. In a period when television plays were increasingly shot as (and sometimes on) film, *The Slab Boys* Aristotelian unity of time and place was itself a statement of aesthetic intent.<sup>5</sup> Much like his portraits, Byrne was presenting his vision of Scottish masculinity against a notably anonymous and functional background.

The hermetically sealed world of the slab room is neither the rural idyll of tartanry nor the masculine urbanity of Clydesideism. The setting of the play and the rigid adherence to this in the television presentation acts as a form of abstract space for the drama to unfold, it provides a social metaphor as well as a dramatic arena, allowing some of the characters to be elevated above their environment and forcing others to be trapped within it. The slab boys' mode of expression not only highlights their social class but (in the 1970s at least) asserted their separation from the vast majority of British (read: English) televisual output. Although not the only Scottish *Play for Today* (one of the mandates of the series was to commission regional

writers) *The Slab Boys* represented a rare example of unfiltered dialect, an element that Byrne would use throughout his work in television.

Spanky, Phil, and Hector are also part of a Scottish tradition that looks elsewhere for its inspiration, in this case America in the form of James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Elvis Presley. In a trope that would come to characterize his written work, Byrne evokes a mythical America, a place that is forever out of reach. Phil idolizes James Dean and all three characters are steeped in 1950s rock and roll. Like many of the British youthsploitation films of the 1950s, American popular culture is more than consumed, it is lived through, it provides a way to transcend the everyday. America of course is a symbol of an exciting cultural otherness and a place where dreams can be made reality. For Byrne's characters however an allegiance to the U.S. also provides a foundation for a non-British Scottishness; it becomes a way to forge a national identity that is distinct from the historical links to England and the United Kingdom.

This trope increases in importance throughout Byrne's writing and not only underlines the sense of longing and restlessness that frames many of his characters but also structures his narratives. In *Tutti Frutti*, *Your Cheatin' Heart* and *The Slab Boys*, Scottishness is formed not only through evocation of vernacular culture and language but of aspiration, ironically the aspiration to be somewhere else.

### **Scottish-American/American-Scottish: *Tutti Frutti* and *Your Cheatin' Heart***

The process through which *Tutti Frutti* came into being has been documented by many writers and has been recounted by Byrne himself a number of times.<sup>6</sup> Byrne was contacted by Bill Bryden who had recently been made Head of Drama at BBC Scotland and asked to write a six-part series about a 1960s rock and roll group who, despite age and lack of success were still touring. The initial inspiration for the series was the Scottish group The Poets who had achieved minimal chart success decades before. The series, stated Bryden, was to star an unnamed Scottish actor and had to be called *Tutti Frutti*. Byrne agreed, so long as he could write all six episodes and that Robbie Coltrane could star.

The commissioning of *Tutti Frutti* should be seen in its historical and industrial context. As George W. Brandt details, increased marketisation had begun to curtail the production of the more experimental one act plays of the 1970s in favour of the more commercial long form

serial (Brandt 1993: 3). Overseas sales and the rapid growth of home video also shaped the output of the two main channels during this period, eager to cash in on TV's new earning potential. This position came to a head in 1986 with the setting up of *The Peacock Commission* that debated the continued relevance of the BBC licence fee (Bonner and Aston 1998: 322-331). The Commission found, with some reservations, that the licence was still valid, however, not for the last time, the principle of public service television was questioned.

The 1980s then was a period of transition for British broadcasting: on the one hand commissioning and production was still headed by the vaguely Reithian philosophies of the previous decades, but on the other, the political and fiscal climate was beginning to have a noticeable effect on program making. High profile series by respected authors *were* still being commissioned by the BBC and ITV (*The Singing Detective* was aired in 1986; Troy Kennedy-Martin's *Edge of Darkness* in 1985; *The Jewel in the Crown* in 1984 and so on) but often only on the strength of the author's previous work. Given this situation, the decision to give Byrne, a relative newcomer to television, an entire mini-series was a brave one and one that reflected the BBC's commitment to BBC Scotland.

*Tutti Frutti* begins at the funeral of Jazza McGlone (Robbie Coltrane), lead singer of *The Magestics* a low rent rock and roll band whose only hit had occurred twenty years previously. Jazza's younger brother Dannie (also played by Coltrane) has returned from New York to attend his funeral and seeing a business opportunity, *The Magestics* manager, Eddie Clockerty (Richard Wilson) persuades him to take his brother's place in the band. The rest of the narrative sees Dannie falling in love with Suzy Kettles (Emma Thompson), the band slowly falling apart, and an exploration of non-traditional Scottish masculinity. In its characterisation and themes, *Tutti Frutti* is remarkably similar to *The Slab Boys*. Both feature the transformative effects of music on boring small-town life, both examine the relationship Scotland has to American popular culture, and both ultimately blend dark humour with tragedy in an aesthetic that challenges both TV naturalism and cultural modernism. If Phil, Spanky, and Hector dream of being transported by rock and roll, the band members of *The Magestics* embody it, bringing a slice of Memphis to the streets of Glasgow. However, McGlone *et al* are not only men out of place, they are men out of time, lifted from the 1950s and deposited in a mise-en-scene that is recognizably 1980s Britain.

As in *The Slab Boys*, the characters of *Tutti Frutti* reflect the cartoons of classical painting, they are comic visions that are as striking in their looks as their actions. As Byrne himself has explained, creating a visual representation of his characters through drawing and painting fixed their physicality and their ontology for the author and Byrne's portrait of Robbie Coltrane as Dannie McGlone hangs in the Scottish National Portrait gallery. The picture has McGlone holding an apple with a worm wriggling out of it, a classical allusion to corruption and the seduction of the senses.<sup>7</sup>

As the allusion suggests, Dannie is indeed the innocent in *Tutti Frutti*, his character is larger than life but it is *his* disappointment, *his* journey of discovery we go on. His return to Scotland from New York is not only a homecoming but a realization about the false fantasies of America – the recognition of the worm in the Big Apple. If so many of Byrne's characters look to America to fulfil their dreams, most find Scottish reality somewhat more achievable. As Byrne stated in a letter to Hugh Herbert 'the mythic America [is] just that...a myth' (Herbert 1993: 194, n.3).

Once again Scottish identity in *Tutti Frutti* is formed out of the characters and their aspirations rather than their connection to a landscape or a history. The main interiors are suburban living rooms, bingo halls and the inside of a touring van. In one of the few scenes to feature a famous Glasgow landmark, the Glasgow School of Art on Renfrew Street, Dannie and Suzy walk through its cramped hallways and gaze out of one its windows. Coltrane's huge frame adds to the sense of claustrophobia, as Dannie talks about his desire to return to the U.S., a desire we know to be ill-founded. As the two discuss his life in New York he confesses that he shares his 'loft' with a maker of 'funny shoes', as Herbert points out, a linguistic clue to the fact that his life over there is nothing but cobblers (Herbert 1993: 181). However, his aspirations towards New York gain greater significance now he has returned home, and we get the impression that he never feels more Scottish than when he is abroad.

This scene exemplifies Byrne's subversion of the traditional methods of equating Scotland with environment, whether rural (as in tartantry) or urban (as in Clydesideism). The city is barely glimpsed through the dirty windows of the loft that, like the slab room, is an anonymous backdrop to the author's main interest: his characters and their relationships. The cartoonishness of Dannie is heightened by the silver lamé suit that he wears throughout the series. He is a tragi-comic figure framed against the blank realism of the *interior* of the Glasgow School of Art building. Scotland, in Byrne's work, is depicted from the inside, it is a phenomenology of nationhood, a country experienced through its enclosed spaces.

The music in the series acts as a form of Greek chorus, commenting on the themes and framing the narrative, as songs like *Love Hurts* by the Everly Brothers underline the turns of the plot. If Dennis Potter employed music as a defamiliarizing device in series like *Pennies from Heaven* (BBC 1978) and *The Singing Detective* (BBC 1986), then Byrne uses it as a poetic one, suggesting a time and place that is both the past and present. Music and its performance seeks to bind the audience into the narrative rather than pulling them out of it. The band members' love of rock and roll propels the narrative but it also allows the audience insights into their characters. It is of course important that the music is American rather than Scottish; like *The Magestics* themselves, rock and roll represents a more exciting period where everything seemed possible and where escape could be achieved through the price of a 45 record. At its heart though *Tutti Frutti* is a celebration of Scottish hybridity and an examination of its capacity to absorb cultures but still retain its essential identity.

It is also crucial to the comic vision of *Tutti Frutti* that such teenage excess is played out by ageing Scottish men. The refusal of Dannie *et al* to see their own absurdity is part of their attraction as characters as their uniform of stage suits, leather trousers, and brothel creepers jar with the grey realism employed to depict the streets of Glasgow. The series debates the changing state of Scottish masculinity as the various band members struggle with the competing responsibilities of late twentieth century gender politics and an adherence to the male-centered (bad) behaviours of rock and roll. Once again however the debate is framed with reference to American rather than traditional Scottish models.

Following *Tutti Frutti's* success Byrne was asked to write another six-part drama *Your Cheatin' Heart*. Less enthusiastically received by both critics and audiences, *Your Cheatin' Heart* is in many ways a distillation of Byrne's literary and artistic vision. It tells the story of Cissie Crouch (Tilda Swinton) and her attempts to free herself of the influence of her ex-husband, Dorwoord (Kevin McMonagle), and her past in the shape of her son who she still pines for. Like *Tutti Frutti*, at the heart of the series is an uneasy courtship, local restaurant critic Frank McClusky (John Gordon Sinclair) pursues Cissie in the same way that Dannie McGlone pursued Suzy Kettles.

Country and western music provides a constant undercurrent to the drama and not only functions as a soundtrack but also serves as a narrative device bringing the characters

together and providing a forum for dramatic tension. Once again, Byrne uses the dynamics of the musical band to explore human relationships, drawing on the inherent performativity of the gig to comment on postmodern psychology. *Your Cheatin' Heart* abounds with references to classic American popular song, a testament to Byrne's continued interest in Scottish hybridity. There is after all a direct link between the musical modes of Celtic folksong and American country and western music. Scottish ballads like *Barbara Allen*, *The Water is Wide*, and *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean* have successfully crossed the Atlantic and found a place in the folk traditions of America. This was especially the case in Northern states like Maine and New Hampshire that saw large numbers of Scottish settlements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still today have the largest percentage of Scottish-Americans. The folk boom of the 1960s and the instigation of Bluegrass in the same period concretised the 'Americanisation' of traditional Scottish tunes. For example the founding father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe made famous a tune entitled *Scotland* that matched traditional airs with bluegrass instrumentation and tonality. However, such trans-Atlantic exchange was not only one way, as Scotland adopted country and western music throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Glasgow has even boasted its own Grand Old Opry since 1974 and continues to support a whole host of line dancing and Americana venues.

Country and western provides punctuation throughout the drama but, unlike *Tutti Frutti*, it fails to cohere into a homogenous vision. Instead of inflecting the realism, the Americana of *Your Cheatin' Heart* undercuts it, transforming Glasgow into a playground of stateside references as Scottish accents mingle with cowboy boots, native Americans, rock and roll and elements drawn from film noir. If *Tutti Frutti* belonged to the tradition of modernist British television, *Your Cheatin' Heart* is postmodern, borrowing its influences randomly and asserting the value of style over substance. Duncan Petrie outlines this point when he states:

*Your Cheatin' Heart* is...saturated with a particular kind of generic iconography – boots, guitars, radios, telephones and cars – that reinforces the American dimension. Yet at every point Byrne undercuts the glossy veneer by a scattergun use of Glaswegian vernacular dialogue, which in its refusal to make concessions puts it on a par with James Kelman. (Petrie 2004: 200)

Here Petrie highlights what this article has asserted is the twin elements of John Byrne's *Scotland*: language and comic characterisation. These two elements are inextricably linked to

each other in Byrne's vision of Scottish identity as the modes of communication, the accent and the cadences of Scottish vernacular, are twinned with the showy glossiness of America popular culture.

Such aesthetics though are born of social change, Byrne's work exists in a long line of 1980s and 1990s drama that deals with the gradual gentrification of major British inner cities. We see this first with films like *The Long Good Friday* (1979) that explored the influx of the middle classes into poorer areas of London's East End. The rest of the decade saw this traced in many films and television shows throughout the country – from the Newcastle of Ron Peck's *Empire State* (1987) to Alan Bleasdale's Liverpool in the last episode of *Boys from the Black Stuff* (1982). In 1990 Glasgow was named European city of culture and some of this can be felt in *Your Cheatin' Heart*. Its opening episode revolves around a piano diner called *The Bar L*, a restaurant that sells soul food and plays light jazz while its diners feast on gumbo and corn bread. *The Bar L* is also the local nickname for the Barlinnie prison known for having housed condemned prisoners before their execution. A shared name links these two locations, but the juxtaposition is jarring and strange. The social comment however is clear: the gentrification of Glasgow's working-class districts is both a welcome and a baffling development. One that brings jobs and culture but also seismic changes that inevitably alters the cultural landscape.

Episode one of *Your Cheatin' Heart* opens on the prison and Byrne adopts a suitably trans-Atlantic tone in the screenplay:

Glasgow, at dusk. A ghostly sickly moon scythes its way between the dark rain clouds that hang over HM prison Barlinnie, (known affectionately to Glaswegians by its 'Cowboy' nickname, the 'Bar-L').

In the visiting room of the prison Cissie Crouch, beanpole-skinny and wearing a dark grey and white horizontally-striped suit buttoned to the throat and with a number tag stitched to the breast pocket, sits across the visiting room table from her husband, Dorwood. (Byrne 1990: 13)

Our first impression is that it is Cissie who is in prison rather than Dorwood. The uniform she wears however is later revealed to be part of the ambience of *the Bar-L* diner. She is a waitress in a prison themed restaurant rather than a convict. This playful confusion over appearances

will form a part of the narrative over the next six episodes as each character revels in the performativity of clothing. The celebration of outward appearance does not end with the wearing of cowboy boots and Stetsons. In the first episode Frank McClusky wears the oversized mac of the investigative reporter or gumshoe, another staple of Americana. Much like other Byrne characters however Frank's aspirations are cut down to size when Billie McPhail (Katy Murphy) describes him as 'a boy scout in a belltent'. In fact, clothes are vital to *Your Cheatin' Heart* not only in terms of style but also narrative. Throughout the six episodes, Frank gradually becomes clothed in the western shirt, jeans and boots of Dorwood, signaling his change from isolated film noir detective to the reluctant hero of a classic western.

Clothing is also important to Byrne himself and many interviews with him begin with a comment on his elegance. Many of his self-portraits are titled with references to what he is wearing (*Portrait with Stetson; Short Hair, Tweed Suit, Self Portrait in a Flowered Jacket*). Viewed in the context of Scottish cultural history, where clothing becomes akin to national identity,<sup>8</sup> Byrne's refusal to fall back on the traditional images of Scottishness (either the traditional garb of tartanry or the masculine attire of Clydesideism) was part of his skill as a dramatist and, perhaps, also the reason audiences were confused by his work's refusal to conform to televisual norms.

The absurdity of Byrne's characters becomes more pronounced by *Your Cheatin' Heart* and the settings darker and more metaphorical. If *Tutti Frutti's* Scotland is one of the cramped interiors, then *Your Cheatin' Heart's* is one of decay and dilapidation. Frank's apartment is full of rubbish, damp, and dirt and the Duke street area of Glasgow that forms the backdrop to much of the opening episode is the kind of urban wasteland that featured in many a British film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. If the settings of *Tutti Frutti* were relatively homogenous, then *Your Cheatin' Heart* offers up a series of contrasts between the old and the new, the working class and the emerging middle class. *The Bar-L* prison and *the Bar-L* piano bar.

As with much of his television work, *Your Cheatin' Heart* also explores the pain of difficult relationships. Cissie is a recovering alcoholic and, because of this, has lost custody of her son. The scenes in which she spies her child from afar are some of the most touching in the series and recall the isolation that dogged Byrne's childhood and relationship to his own mother. Hewison makes the prescient point that, for all its postmodern playfulness, *Your*

*Cheatin Heart* is essentially concerned with Cissie's longing for her child (Hewison 2011: 75). At the conclusion to the series, she is seen staring out into the North Sea in a scene that mirrors the end of the canonical chase of the Western – the outlaw has been stopped by the ocean and must face her 'real' self. The static camera frames Cissie as she walks along the very British seaside promenade with Dorwood's Dobro, a talisman that she has been carrying throughout the episode. As the camera lingers on her, she stops, bends, drops the guitar on the ground and walks away from it, symbolically abandoning the past in favour of an uncertain future. At the end of the series it is Cissie who has taken the mantle of cowboy hero, disappearing into the sunset, or what passes for one in Aberdeen on a rainy day.

It is possible to see *Your Cheatin' Heart* as the culmination to Byrne's writing. What began in *The Slab Boys* as a nod to the importance of American culture to young people in Glasgow, ends up as a full-scale absurdist drama, as characters wander the streets of Glasgow in Stetsons, chaps, and cowboy hats without drawing so much as a second glance from those around them. Much like the characters of *Tutti Frutti* however the tone is decidedly Scottish. It is this absurdism that recalls Hewison's notion of 'semi-magical realism', a phrase that attempts to describes Byrne's artistic and televisual aesthetic.

Writing in the important BFI collection *Scotch Reels* John Caughie postulates on what a Scottish television might consist of:

The massive failure of actually existing Scottish television...is that not only has it not engaged with modernism (developing the initiative perhaps of James McTaggart), but it has not even engaged with the possibility of a naturalism which is capable of doing what naturalism was invented to do. (Caughie 1982: 121)

It is an irony of course that a text that would combine modernism and naturalism, John Byrne's *Tutti Frutti*, was only five years away at this point. Through his vision Byrne managed consistently to evoke a Scottish identity that was as authentic as it was inventive, as comic as it was dark, and as sentimental as it was critical.

It is possible to read Byrne's work against the background of more traditional depictions of Scottish identity as being formed through, and being a correlative of, place and space. The characters in Byrne's dramas inhabit anonymous, functional environments that could be anywhere, any country. However, national identity and belonging are continually stressed through speech patterns, through popular culture and through an obsession to be elsewhere. In his television work especially Byrne explored what it was like to be Scottish but to have an affinity to somewhere else, somewhere far away, somewhere more exciting. Somewhere like America. America, importantly is also not Britain, and not England. An affinity with America allows Byrne's characters to assert an ahistorical, aspirational Scottish identity that is untainted by political reality. It is this that binds his characters together and, ironically, this that makes them indelibly Scottish.

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#### Television Shows:

*Play for Today: The Slab Boys* (BBC 1979)

*Tutti Frutti* (BBC 1986)

*Your Cheatin' Heart* (BBC 1990)

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#### Endnotes.

<sup>1</sup> John Byrne's television works include *Play for Today: The Slab Boys* (1979); *The Crown Court* (1984); *Tutti Frutti* (1987); *The Play on One: Normal Service* (1988); *Area: Byrne on Byrne* (1988); *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1990) and *Screenplay: Boswell and Johnson's Tour of the Western Isles* (1993).

<sup>2</sup> As Hewison (2011: 75) notes, *Tutti Frutti* (for reasons unknown) was never released on VHS and only received a DVD release in 2009; *Your Cheatin' Heart* fared worse being released on DVD in 2015.

<sup>3</sup> It is useful for example to compare Byrne's Scotland with that of Peter McDougall's whose own television plays like *Down Among the Big Boys* (BBC, 1993) and *The Elephant's Graveyard* (BBC, 1976), are more likely to reflect a Scottish identity formed out of the dialectic between character and place.

<sup>4</sup> Although not the norm, some other notable plays in the *Play for Today* series experimented with theatrical settings, for example Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* (1979).

<sup>5</sup> Lez Cooke (2003: 92) states that of the 303 *Plays for Today* that were made between 1970 and 1984 101 were shot on film. Due to the more expensive cost of celluloid, these tended to be the higher profile works from better known writers and directors such as Alan Clarke and Willy Russell. Plays like *Brimstone and Treacle* by Dennis Potter contain some external scenes shot on film but internal scenes were videotaped in the studio.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Hugh Herbert (1993) and Hewison (2011)

<sup>7</sup> See for example Silvia Malaguzzi (2008: 229)

<sup>8</sup> See for example the visual essay by Murray Grigor in McArthur (1982: 17- 39)